

Remarks on the School Reconstruction Initiative *July 11, 1996*

Thank you very much. I want to welcome Senator Moseley-Braun here, along with Senator Claiborne Pell, Senator Bob Graham, Congressman Ben Cardin, and Congressman Elijah Cummings. I thank them all for their concern for this issue and their leadership.

I think some of you know that I had originally planned to make this announcement in Senator Graham's home State in Florida, but Hurricane Bertha had other ideas. So before I get into the announcement, let me say that we are all watching the course of that storm. We pray that it doesn't cause extensive damage. The people of the Southeast know that we will be there to help them if it does. FEMA is now on the ground, and they are prepared. Our thoughts are with the people of the Southeast. And again, we're hoping for the best.

I'm here to announce a national commitment to rebuild our schools so that they can serve our children in the 21st century. Our Nation's mission must be to offer opportunity to all, to demand responsibility from all, and to come together as a community so that we can build better lives together. Our most basic expression of these values is perhaps the education we offer to our children.

We've worked hard to make our young people the best educated in the world as we enter the 21st century, putting in place a comprehensive strategy to renew our schools, to lift our standards at every level. We've expanded the Head Start preschool program. We've helped schools to help to set and to meet higher standards. We've also worked hard to develop higher standards and better training for our teachers. And we've created an important network of school-to-work programs for young people to be properly trained if they don't go on to 4-year institutions of higher education.

We're now on our way to connecting every classroom and library in the United States to the Internet by the year 2000. We're making our schools safer with the zero tolerance for guns in our schools and by encouraging and supporting communities to take their own initiatives, including school uniforms, imposing curfews, and stronger enforcement of the truancy laws. We're opening the doors of college wider

than ever through lower cost student loans, including better repayment terms; expanded Pell grant scholarships—Senator Pell, thank you for that; AmeriCorps; and our proposals to give families tax cuts to pay for higher education.

But all this progress is at risk if our children are asked to learn in a landscape that is littered with peeling paint and broken glass, if our teachers are asked to build up children in buildings that are falling down.

I remember the schools that I attended. They were pretty typical. Most of them were fairly old when I was there. They weren't fancy, but they were clean, they were well-maintained, they were treated with respect. They sent every student a clear message: You are important to us. We take your education seriously. That was how my parents' generation kept faith with us, and that is how we must keep faith with our children.

Now, Senator Moseley-Braun mentioned this report from the General Accounting Office. I want to hold it up again because I want to urge every Member of Congress, every Governor, every State legislator, every local school official, every school board member who cares about the condition of education and the future of education in our country to get a copy of this report and to read it. The report came out 3 weeks ago. It was requested by a number of Senators, and it confirms that we are not honoring this generational compact.

I want to thank here, before I go forward, the Members of the Senate and the House who have been interested in this, those who are here whom I've introduced and especially Congresswoman Nita Lowey who is sponsoring efforts in the House along with Congressman Cardin and Congressman Cummings and others but most especially Carol Moseley-Braun. She was the first person who brought this matter to my attention as an area where the National Government ought to do something. And she has been literally dogged in her persistence in this issue, staying with it day-in and day-out, week-in and week-out, month-in and month-out. The school children of our Nation owe her a debt of gratitude.

The report shows that our Nation's schools are increasingly rundown, overcrowded, and technologically ill-equipped. Too many school buildings and classrooms are literally a shambles. According to the report, one-third of our schools need major repair or outright replacement; 60 percent need work on major building features—a sagging roof, a cracked foundation; 46 percent lack even the basic electrical wiring to support computers, modems, and modern communications technology. These problems are found all across America, in cities and suburbs and one-stoplight towns.

This is a matter of real urgency. In just 2 months our schools will open their doors to the largest number of students in the history of our Republic, 51.7 million. And enrollment is expected to continue to rise over the next few years.

We have to rebuild these schools for another reason as well. Increasingly our schools are critical to bringing our communities together. We want them to serve the public not just during the school hours but after hours, to function as vital community centers, places for recreation and learning, positive places where children can be when they can't be at home and school is no longer going on, gathering places for young people and adults alike. Bringing our schools into the 21st century is a national challenge that demands a national commitment.

Today I am proposing that the Federal Government for the first time join with States and communities to modernize and renovate our public schools. We will provide \$5 billion over the next 4 years for school construction and renovation. Together with investments by States and localities, this would result in \$20 billion in new resources for school modernization.

That's a 25 percent increase over the next 4 years.

Our school construction initiative would be flexible. It would give communities and States the power to decide how to use the new resources. It would help those who help themselves, requiring local communities to take responsibility for this effort. And it would focus on sparking new projects, not merely subsidizing existing ones.

The schools of the future should be safe and spacious, good places to learn. The schools of the future should be equipped with computers, new media, and state-of-the-art science labs. And the schools of the future should not only teach our children during the day but bring together families and neighbors in the evening as community schools. Our initiative can help to make these goals a reality.

You know, we expect an awful lot of our schools. We expect a lot of our students in this age of possibility. And all Americans have a lot riding on their living up to these expectations. But we cannot expect our children and our teachers to build strong lives on a crumbling foundation.

This generation has a duty to give the next generation a future of genuine opportunity. Our children deserve the best. I am determined that they will get it. And this proposal will go a long way toward helping those folks who are out there on the frontlines of education to succeed and to build the brightest, the best prepared, the most secure, and the most successful generation of young people in the history of our Nation.

Thank you very much.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:15 p.m. in the Rose Garden at the White House.

Letter to the Women of Srebrenica, Bosnia, on the Anniversary of the Fall of Srebrenica

July 11, 1996

To the Women of Srebrenica:

Today you have come together because of a horrible, tragic event that changed your lives forever. There can be no justification for the

barbaric terror you and your loved ones endured, or for the losses you continue to suffer.

Over these past four long years, the United States has joined the international community sending humanitarian aid and later 20,000